DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 468 315 FL 027 395

AUTHOR	Diab, Rula
TITLE	Political and Socio-Cultural Factors in Foreign Language Education: The Case of Lebanon.
PUB DATE	2000-00-00
NOTE	13p.; In: Proceedings for the Texas Foreign Language [Education] Conference (Austin, Texas, March 31-April 1, 2000); see FL 027 384. This paper was not presented at the conference.
PUB TYPE	Journal Articles (080) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
JOURNAL CIT	Texas Papers in Foreign Language Education; v5 n1 p177-187 spec iss Fall 2000
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Arabic; Elementary Secondary Education; *English (Second Language); Foreign Countries; Gender Issues; *Political Influences; Second Language Instruction; *Second Language Learning; *Sociocultural Patterns; Socioeconomic Status; Uncommonly Taught Languages
IDENTIFIERS	*Lebanon

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the importance of political and sociocultural factors in foreign language education, focusing on English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) learning in Lebanon. It begins with a historical review of foreign language education in Lebanon, then discusses the current role and status of English in the Lebanese context, which reveals several interrelated political and sociocultural factors that play a crucial role in ESL learning. These include religious background (Lebanon is multisectarian); political affiliations (the conflict between Arab nationalism and western orientation); socioeconomic status (students from different socioeconomic backgrounds might have different attitudes and motivations toward learning English, and socioeconomic status plays a role in the schools students enroll in and the kind of ESL education they receive); influence of Arabic as the native language (the perception by some students that Arabic is a sacred, God-given language, while English is inherently inferior); and gender (e.g., teacher gender may influence student achievement, motivation, and attitudes, and many Lebanese females may be interested in learning English for non-career reasons). (Contains 12 references.) (SM)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

Political and Socio-Cultural Factors in Foreign Language Education: The Case of Lebanon

RULA DIAB, University of Texas at Austin

ED 468 315

FL027395

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Political and Socio-Cultural Factors in Foreign Language Education: The Case of Lebanon

RULA DIAB, University of Texas at Austin

This paper examines the importance of political and socio-cultural factors in foreign language education, focusing on EFL learning in Lebanon. A brief historical review of foreign language education in Lebanon and an overview of the current role and status of English in the Lebanese context will be provided, on the basis of which a discussion of the main political and socio-cultural factors that influence Lebanese EFL students' motivations and attitudes towards learning English will be presented.

INTRODUCTION

Students' motivations and attitudes towards the learning of foreign languages are often influenced by the broader socio-cultural context. In the case of foreign language education in Lebanon, political and socio-cultural factors have been fundamental in influencing, and perhaps even shaping, Lebanese students' motivations and attitudes towards learning the two main foreign languages, English and French. This paper will focus on the importance of such factors in the particular case of EFL learning in Lebanon. A historical review of foreign language education in Lebanon and a discussion of the current role and status of English in the Lebanese context will reveal several inter-related political and socio-cultural factors that play a crucial role in EFL learning in Lebanon.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The role of foreign languages in Arab countries in general and in Lebanon in particular is a long and complex one. Several factors have contributed to the teaching and learning of foreign languages, mainly English and French, in the Arab World. Among these factors are the strategic geographical position of the Middle East and the ongoing Western interest in the economics and politics of the region, the British and French colonization of Arab countries in the middle of the 20th century, and the emergence of English as a leading international language for business, technology, and communication.

The above factors apply very well in the case of Lebanon. A historical review of foreign language education in Lebanon will reveal how the Western missionaries in the 18th and 19th centuries, the colonization by France right after the end of World War I until the Lebanese Independence in 1943, and the emergence of English as a leading international language all had a major influence on the learning and teaching of foreign languages, mainly English and French, in Lebanon.

FL023395

Prior to World War I

During the period of the Ottoman rule (1516-1918), Lebanon managed to maintain a great degree of autonomy, mainly because of the nature of its religious makeup, a multisectarian one composed of six main communities: Maronite Christians, Greek Orthodox Christians, Catholic Christians, Shiite Muslims, Sunni Muslims, and Druze. According to Shaaban and Ghaith (1999), this multisectarian society prompted European countries to support communities in Lebanon that shared the same religious faith. Thus, France supported Maronite and Catholic communities, Russia supported the Orthodox, and Turkey sided with the Muslims.

Following the establishment of these ties between the various Lebanese religious communities and the West, competing missionaries arrived in Lebanon and established several schools that exposed the Lebanese to Western cultures and languages. According to Shaaban and Ghaith (1999), the most active of these missionaries were the French Jesuits and the American Protestants. The French Jesuits established strong relations with the Maronite Christians and founded several schools based on the French system of education, including, in 1875, the institution of higher learning now known as the University of Saint Joseph, which uses French as the language of instruction in most subjects and is still considered a strong cultural link between France and Lebanon.

American missionaries also founded several schools, including the well-known American University of Beirut (AUB), previously known as the Syrian Protestant College, which was founded in Beirut in 1866 by American Protestant missionaries in Lebanon and Syria at a time when Beirut was part of Syria under Ottoman rule. AUB, which uses English as the medium of instruction, later came to be viewed as the leading institution of higher learning in the Middle East, attracting students from several nations in the Middle East, Mediterranean region, and Europe. Needless to say, the existence of such a prestigious American institution in Beirut has had a big impact on the role and status of the English language in Lebanon. In a country largely influenced by the French language and culture, AUB was a major factor in promoting the American system of education and American English language in Lebanon.

According to Shaaban and Ghaith (1996), foreign languages spread mainly along sectarian lines during that period, with Catholics and Maronites learning French, most Muslims Arabic, and Muslim and Greek Orthodox elite English, a situation that obviously links religious background to language education and implies that Catholic and Maronite groups were not only learning French but were *not* learning English. Constantine (1995) contends that Lebanese Maronite Christians did not welcome the American missionaries, wanting to maintain their relations with France

and fearing the expansion of Protestant Churches. Thus, schools of French missionaries were mainly established in Maronite villages and regions, while American missionary schools thrived in Orthodox and Druze villages.

Indeed, most Lebanese Maronite and Catholic communities today still have strong affinities for France, a country that they think of as their "protector;" not surprisingly, in a predominantly Muslim Arab region, these Christian communities hold on to their strong ties with France. Christian Orthodox communities, on the other hand, preferred to establish ties with American Protestants. In fact, when the missionaries first arrived, a large proportion of the Lebanese Orthodox community was converted to Protestantism. Thus, religious background seems to play an important role in the Lebanese population's affiliations with the West and consequently with Western foreign languages, particularly English and French.

The French Mandate (1920-1943)

Even before the period of the French mandate, a large portion of the Lebanese population, mainly Maronites, were already influenced by the French language and culture. According to Mansfield (1976), in his book *The Arabs*, France had no need to impose its language and culture on the Christian Lebanese, since they had already "long accepted it [the French language] as an instrument of education" (p. 240).

However, not surprisingly, the French mandate strengthened this French influence in Lebanon. During the period of the French mandate, the French language became an official language in Lebanon in addition to Arabic; French was taught in all schools and was the medium of instruction for sciences, mathematics, and social studies at all levels of education (Shaaban & Ghaith, 1999). Even private American and British schools which use English as the medium of instruction had to teach French as well. In addition, the French introduced a system of public examinations modeled on their own educational system.

Needless to say, a proficiency in French was essential for academic and professional success in Lebanon during that period; French became the language of the educated and the elite. In addition, the majority of students at French schools were Christians, which, according to Shaaban and Ghaith (1999), resulted in educational inequalities in favor of Catholic and Maronite groups in Lebanon and created resentment among Muslims, who believed that the French were creating a Christian political and economic elite affiliated with France and the French language and having no allegiance to Arabic. Thus, this situation helped to foster feelings of Arab nationalism and rejection of Western cultures and languages among certain (mainly Muslim) groups in Lebanon.

The Independence Era (1943-1975)

After Lebanese independence in 1943, Arabic became the only official language in Lebanon, and in 1946, English became one of the two compulsory foreign languages in secondary schools, along with French. Indeed, the Lebanese government's official curriculum for public schools gave equal importance to French and English. All schools, national and foreign, were required to use the official Lebanese curricula; however, schools were allowed to choose their own instructional methods.

During this period, several decrees pertaining to language education were issued, most of which aimed at strengthening the role of Arabic in education and using it as a medium of instruction. However, these decrees were mostly a hasty expression of national pride and did not result from careful planning; the fact remained that French and English were "deeply rooted in the Lebanese educational system" (Shaaban & Ghaith, 1996, p. 101) and both remained dominant as media of instruction in many Lebanese schools. Economic reasons mainly contributed to this spread of foreign languages as media of instruction, especially English, which at that time was starting to become more influential than French in Lebanon, mainly because of the international influence of the United States and the growing importance of the English language in international business, science, and technology (Shaaban & Ghaith, 1996).

The Civil War (1975-1989)

When the civil war broke out in Lebanon in 1975, it resulted in a chaotic educational situation, with declining standards in most schools because of the lack of qualified faculty, loss of instructional time, and destruction of school facilities. Quality education deteriorated drastically at most public schools in the country and schools in the former South Lebanon "security zone" region that was occupied by Israel from 1978 until May 2000. At the same time, however, there was an increase in the number of private schools, mainly in the Greater Beirut area, and the use of English as a medium of instruction continued to rise. Most private schools established during the civil war were English-medium schools, regardless of their ideological or religious orientations (Shaaban & Ghaith, 1996), and new English-medium universities were established, even in traditional "French-oriented" regions, which further contributed to the elitist system of education where those who could not afford expensive private schools with strong English programs did not have much chance of professional or social advancement.

The Present Situation

In 1989, the Lebanese civil war officially came to an end, and new educational plans were issued. These plans emphasized the importance of Arabic as the native language and the only official language in Lebanon; however, there was also an acknowledgment of the importance of foreign languages, mainly English and

French, exemplified by the new Lebanese Curriculum issued in 1997 that gave equal weight to Arabic and either English or French, depending on whether the particular school is English or French-medium. The number of hours both the native language and either English or French is taught is equivalent at all the educational levels (Shaaban & Ghaith, 1999).

Currently, both private and public schools are also allowed to decide which language is appropriate for instruction. Indeed, in 1994, an official decree stated that foreign languages, mainly English or French, can be used as media of instruction in all cycles, even pre-school and elementary levels, indicating a shift from using Arabic as an instructional language (Shaaban and Ghaith, 1999). In addition, there are currently plans to modernize the educational system in Lebanon and train foreign language teachers in general and EFL teachers in particular on a large-scale basis, which further reveals that foreign languages, and especially English, are likely to remain an essential component of the Lebanese educational system.

The Current Role And Status Of English In Lebanon

As revealed in the historical review, proficiency in English has become essential for academic and professional success in Lebanon, and by the middle of the 20th century, English was starting to become more influential than French. Constantine (1995) claims that the importance of the French culture and language in Lebanon has been gradually weakening, mainly because of the competition from American culture. Statistics for the academic year 1993-1994 show that there were 132 primary and middle public schools which had adopted English as the main foreign language alongside Arabic during that academic year, a large number compared with the early 1970's when only a few schools had English as the main foreign language (Constantine).

Moreover, according to Shaaban and Ghaith (1999), the traditional cultural-linguistic conflict between Arabic and foreign languages as media of instruction is now shifting towards "full-fledged multilingualism in society as well as in education" (p. 1) and is being gradually replaced by a struggle between English and French, with English gaining ground so far, mainly because of economic and practical considerations. Most prestigious private universities in Lebanon, such as the previously mentioned American University of Beirut (AUB), the Lebanese American University, and the University of Balamand, use English as the medium of instruction and require scores on English entrance examinations that determine whether students are admitted or not and how many English language courses they are required to take. In addition, many business corporations currently demand that their employees demonstrate a certain level of proficiency in English. The need for intensive English language teaching programs in Beirut, and the proliferation of English language teaching institutes throughout the country also

reveal the growing importance of English in Lebanon.

Furthermore, the favorable attitudes of young Lebanese towards the English language also reveal the important role of English in the country. In a study investigating the motivations and attitudes of Lebanese university EFL students towards learning English, Yazigy (1994) found that of the 164 students (71 males and 93 females) participating in her study, 98% disagreed that learning English is "a waste of time" and an average of 84% reported that they plan to learn English as much as possible and speak it outside the classroom if given the opportunity. Overwhelmingly, the students in this study revealed positive attitudes towards the English language and rated it as a "useful, valuable, and practical" language, a finding that Yazigy suggested might be attributable to the current international importance of English. Based on this study, Yazigy concluded that there is a need in Lebanon to know the English language as "the language of the world, commerce, higher education and to an extent for communicative purposes" (p. 72).

Another strong indication of the expanding role of English in Lebanon is the fact that 63% of French-medium schools currently teach English as a third language as opposed to only 26% of English-medium schools that teach French as a third language (Smaily, 1996, as cited in Shaaban & Ghaith, 1999). Thus, teaching English in Lebanon is obviously regarded as essential, with even traditionally French-centered schools realizing that they need to offer EFL classes if they want to attract students. In the few schools that use Arabic as the medium of instruction, parents are concerned about their children losing career opportunities because they haven't achieved a certain level of proficiency in English (Shaaban & Ghaith, 1999).

Finally, a committee set by the (Lebanese) National Center for Educational Research and Development has aimed at developing an EFL curriculum to be implemented nation-wide in Lebanon. Shaaban and Ghaith (1997), coordinators of the work of this committee, identify three main goals of teaching EFL in Lebanon, based on both the principles of a new educational policy in post-war Lebanon as well as contemporary thoughts in the fields of curriculum planning and foreign language education: "using English as a medium of instruction in content areas; using English for communication in social settings; and using correct and appropriate English academically, socially, and culturally" (p. 201). Thus, the English language obviously holds great power in the Lebanese context, in which anyone hoping to advance academically, socially, or professionally must attain a certain level of proficiency in English.

Influential Political And Socio-Cultural Factors In The Lebanese Context

Based on the above historical review and the discussion of the role and status of English in Lebanon, several inter-related variables emerge as crucial factors influencing Lebanese

students' motivations and attitudes towards learning foreign languages in general and English in particular.

Religious Background

As seen in the historical review, religious background seems to play an important role in the Lebanese population's affiliations with the West and consequently with Western foreign languages, particularly English and French. According to Constantine (1995), the multi-sectarian nature of Lebanon stands out and must be taken into account; as discussed above, the six main religious communities can have very different attitudes and beliefs about several aspects of life in Lebanon, including foreign language learning and the relative importance of English and French.

Political Affiliations

Political affiliations, which are closely related to religious background in Lebanon, are also influential in shaping Lebanese students' motivations and attitudes towards learning foreign languages. Kraidy (1998) aptly points out that Lebanon apparently suffers from an "identity crisis:" Is Lebanon, as Lebanese nationalists argue, "a unique country with Phoenician ascendance, Western affinities, distinct from its Arab environment," (p. 3) or is it an inseparable part of the Arab world, sharing the history, culture, and national identity of its neighboring Arab countries? This conflict is important to consider when analyzing Lebanese students' motivations towards learning Western foreign languages. According to Shaaban (1990), using English or French as a medium of instruction can be considered "a form of conscious identification with the West" for some groups in Lebanon, who feel that knowledge of foreign languages and cultures, namely French and English, "sets them apart from the rest of the Arabs and brings them closer to the western heritage" (p. 25).

Shaaban (1990) also points out that some Lebanese groups are very much in favor of the "Arabization" of education in Lebanon, making Arabic the official and only medium of instruction, while other Lebanese groups vehemently oppose such a policy. He provides the example of the (then) Minister of Education in Lebanon, a Maronite Christian, stating in 1991 that "under no circumstances would we think of Arabizing education in Lebanon," (as cited in Shaaban, p. 25), a strong statement that the Lebanese Makassed Islamic Philanthropic Association reacted angrily to, since this association had initiated a project to Arabize the teaching of mathematics and sciences at the elementary and intermediate levels in its schools.

Thus, this conflict between Arab nationalism and western orientation reveals that religious background is associated with certain political affiliations and orientations in Lebanon, and the two factors work together to shape motivations and attitudes towards foreign language learning. Lebanese students' motivations for learning English as a second language as opposed to learning French, for example, are presumably

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

largely shaped by their family's religious and political affiliations. One might expect that most Maronite Christians, having a long history of attending French-medium schools and placing much importance on the importance and prestige of French, would want their children to continue in this tradition; however, the importance of English in commerce and business nowadays might prompt these same individuals to encourage their children to learn both languages. Lebanese who have no affiliations with France and the French language, on the other hand, are likely to encourage their children to learn English with little concern about their learning French.

Socio-Economic Status

Students from different socio-economic backgrounds might also have different attitudes and motivations towards learning English. Socio-economic status plays an important role in the choice of school students enroll in, and consequently in the kind of EFL education they receive. There are great differences in teachers' qualifications and instructional programs among the various schools in Lebanon; private schools in Beirut are known to be more rigorous and have higher standards of education and stronger foreign language programs than public schools and many schools outside Beirut (Shaaban & Ghaith, 1996).

It is probably safe to assume that most middle-class and upper-class families enroll their children in private schools that have strong English or French language programs and that probably have either language as a medium of instruction. Indeed, according to Shaaban and Ghaith (1999), the educational inequalities today are mostly a result of socio-economic rather than sectarian divisions; low middle and working classes cannot financially afford expensive private schools with strong English programs and therefore do not have much chance of professional and social advancement. However, it is important to keep in mind that religious affiliation and socio-economic background may interact in complex ways, since better-educated Christians and elite Sunni Muslims tend to dominate the upper and middle classes.

Therefore, students coming from English-medium private schools are obviously expected to be more proficient in the English language than students coming from French or Arabic-medium schools and even English-medium public schools. Having had the opportunity to practice English in most of their classes and to be taught by qualified EFL instructors in American-oriented schools, these students might also be expected to be more motivated and to have more positive attitudes towards learning English than those who have not had such opportunities.

Influence of Arabic as the Native Language

A factor that might also influence some Lebanese students' motivations and attitudes towards language learning is the perception of Arabic, particularly among Muslims, as a sa-

cred God-given language, appreciated for its beauty and vast literary tradition in addition to its religious value (Yazigy, 1994). Thus, some Lebanese groups might regard English or French as inherently inferior to Arabic, an attitude that can have a possibly harmful effect on their learning of these foreign languages.

Gender

A final important factor to consider in the particular Lebanese EFL socio-cultural context is gender. According to Ehrlich (1997), the socio-cultural contexts in which second or foreign languages are acquired and the way in which gender is locally constructed in these specific speech communities should be taken into account when examining differences in second or foreign language learning. Thus, it is important to consider the way gender is socially constructed in the particular Lebanese socio-cultural context and to examine the possible differences in motivation and attitudes towards learning English between males and females in Lebanon.

First, since more females in Lebanon are currently enrolled in higher education and entering the job market than ever before, a large number of both male and female EFL learners in Lebanon are expected to be instrumentally motivated to learn English. At the same time, however, females might also be interested in learning English for non- career or professional related reasons. While male Lebanese students tend to be more interested in learning English for purely professional and career aspirations, for many females in Lebanon, speaking English well is also considered a status symbol, indicating a higher social class and a higher level of education.

In addition, the gender of the teacher may have an influence on the achievement, attitudes, and motivations of the students towards the language (Cross, 1983). In Lebanon, EFL teachers are predominantly female. Thus, even though several other factors are involved in the EFL learning and teaching situation, it might be expected that female EFL learners in Lebanon will be higher achievers, more motivated, and have more positive attitudes towards EFL learning than males. Moreover, the large number of EFL female teachers helps in fostering the popular idea that EFL teaching is a female domain; therefore, having almost no male EFL teachers as role models, very few males might be motivated to major in English or become EFL teachers themselves.

A final possible gender difference in the Lebanese context might involve the fact that many women in Lebanon admire certain Western cultural values that offer greater social freedom and choices for women than most countries in the Arab world, including Lebanon. Abu-Rabia and Feuerverger (1996) found that male Arab students in Canada showed only an instrumental motivation in learning English, while females indicated a strong integrative motivation. Based on interviews conducted with the participants, the authors concluded that

male Arab students viewed the Canadian context as one that

clashes with their own cultural values, while female Arab students revealed a positive attitude toward Canadian society's approach to women's goals and ambitions. Abu-Rabia and Feuerverger (1996) attributed the Arab female students' strong integrative motivation to the admiration they seem to hold of the greater personal and professional freedom that women in Canada and in the West generally have. The same phenomenon certainly holds for many women in Lebanon, implying that more female EFL learners in Lebanon might be integratively motivated in learning English than males. Nevertheless, we have to keep in mind that gender will obviously interact in very complex ways with other background variables and a combination of factors, not any single variable, will influence and shape Lebanese students' motivations and attitudes towards learning English.

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to examine the importance of political and socio-cultural factors in foreign language education, focusing on EFL learning in Lebanon. A brief historical review of foreign language education in Lebanon and an overview of the current role and status of English in the Lebanese context reveal several inter-related political and socio-cultural factors influencing EFL learning in Lebanon. Factors such as religious background, political affiliations, and socio-economic status play a crucial role in shaping Lebanese students' motivations and attitudes towards learning English as a foreign language. Lebanon is composed of several heterogeneous groups that can have very different and even conflicting opinions about foreign language learning and teaching, an important fact to consider when examining the foreign language situation in Lebanon in general or the Lebanese EFL learning and teaching situation in particular.

REFERENCES

Abu-Rabia, S., & Feuerverger, G. (1996). Toward understanding the second language learning of Arab students in Israel and Canada: The relationship of attitudes and cultural background to reading comprehension. *Canadian Modern Language Review, 52,* 359-385.

Constantine, N. (1995). Teacher training for intercultural education in Lebanon. In R. Gagliardi (Ed.), *Teacher training and multiculturalism: National studies. Studies in comparative education* (pp. 114-139). Paris, France. International Bureau of Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 389 671)

Cross, D. (1983). Sex differences in achievement. *System, 11* (2), 159-162.

Ehrlich, S. (1997). Gender as social practice: Implications for second language

acquisition. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 19,* 421-446.

Kraidy, M. (1998). State control on television news in post-war Lebanon. *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication*, 81st, Baltimore, Maryland. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 423 566)

Mansfield, P. (1976). *The Arabs*. London: Penguin Books Limited.

Shaaban, K. (1990). A sociolinguistic analysis of language-related issues in the Arab World. *Al-Abhath, 38*, 17-35.

Shaaban, K., & Ghaith, G. (1996). Language-in-education policy and planning: The case of Lebanon. *Mediterranean Journal of Educational Studies, 1*, 95-105.

Shaaban, K., & Ghaith, G. (1997). An integrated approach to foreign language learning in Lebanon. *Language, Culture, and Curriculum, 10*, 200-207.

Shaaban, K., & Ghaith, G. (1999). Lebanon's language-in-education policies: From bilingualism to trilingualism. *Language Problems and Language Planning, 23*, 1-16.

Yazigy, R. (1994). Perception of Arabic as native language and the learning of English. *Language Learning Journal, 9*, 68-74.

U.S. Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
National Library of Education (NLE)
Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)

NOTICE

Reproduction Basis

[X] This document is covered by a signed "Reproduction Release (Blanket)" form (on file within the ERIC system), encompassing all or classes of documents from its source organization and, therefore, does not require a "Specific Document" Release form.

[ ] This document is Federally-funded, or carries its own permission to reproduce, or is otherwise in the public domain and, therefore, may be reproduced by ERIC without a signed Reproduction Release form (either "Specific Document" or "Blanket").